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Figurative language and the semantics-pragmatics distinction

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Abstract

This article aims at demonstrating that the cognitive mechanisms underlying certain tropes (for example, metaphor or metonymy) may assume variable degrees of conventionalisation, thereby giving rise to a range of phenomena along either side of the semantics/pragmatics distinction. Examining specifically cases of metonymy, I propose a pragmatic account of creative, one-off metonymic expressions using the framework of relevance theory; my main argument is that metonymy is a variety of the interpretative use of language. I further look at degrees of conventionalisation that a given metonymy may go through until it becomes fully semanticised, thus bringing about semantic change. My discussion should have far-reaching implications for lexical semantics and the relevance-theoretic distinction between descriptive and interpretative use.

Keywords: conventionalisation; figures of speech; interpretative use; metonymy; polysemy; relevance; semantics/pragmatics distinction

1 Introduction

It is by now a commonplace in the pragmatic and psycholinguistic literature that the so-called 'figures of speech' such as metaphor or metonymy are not mere linguistic devices serving ornamental or literary purposes but correspond to mental 'figures' grounded in cognititon (see Lakoff 1987, Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, 1990, Gibbs 1994). By locating the source of figurativeness in human cognitive make-up recent research has decisively moved away from the idea that non-literal language constitutes a departure from a linguistic norm; at the same time it has produced a way of accounting for the productivity, spontaneity and ease of understanding of tropes in a variety of languages and cultures.

A question that is not frequently addressed in the literature is the degree to which the operation of the 'poetics of mind' (Gibbs 1994) interacts with linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge, that is, how it correlates with the semantics-pragmatics distinction. My aim in this article is to show that the phenomena classified under each of the tropes do not necessarily constitute a natural class but form rather a continuum which cross-cuts the semantics-pragmatics borderline. The endpoints of this continuum are on the one hand one-off, creative uses, and on the other fully conventionalised uses that have entered the lexicon; the intermediate space is taken up by figurative uses which enjoy varying degrees of conventionalisation. My discussion will make use of the broader relevance-theoretic claims for cognition and utterance interpretation (see mainly Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), which have provided extremely rich insights into creative uses of language. As for the specific examples, I choose to concentrate on metonymy, a device not so thoroughly studied in the literature; I expect that the results will carry over to other kinds of figurative use.[1]

My argument proceeds as follows: in section 2 I critically review the cognitive linguistics analysis of metonymy which ignores different degrees of conventionalisation and allows an augmented role to cultural over cognitive factors. In section 3 I offer a relevance-theoretic account of metonymy as a variety of the interpretative use of language. After illustrating the comprehension of novel instances of metonymy, I go on to demonstrate how the same mechanism gives rise to generalised pragmatic routines, semantic extensions, lexical polysemy and ultimately semantic change.

2 The cognitive linguistics approach

Consider the following examples of metonymies:

(1) The company went for a picnic today.
(2) Let there be no more Chernobyls.

In the first utterance the NP *the company* is used to refer to the employees of the company; in the second the name *Chernobyl* refers not to a place but to a nuclear accident of the sort that once occurred in a nuclear power station of that city. Much of the work done on the comprehension of such utterances comes from the tradition of cognitive linguistics; Lakoff (1987), for instance, can be considered a fairly standard approach. In his view (see Lakoff 1987: 84–5), the cognitive organisation underlying metonymy (what he calls a 'metonymic model') has the following characteristics:

a) There is a 'target' concept A to be understood for some purpose in some context.
b) There is a conceptual structure containing both A and another concept B.
c) B is either part of A or closely associated with it in that conceptual structure. Typically, a choice of B will uniquely determine A, within that conceptual structure.
d) Compared to A, B is either easier to understand, easier to remember, easier to recognise, or more immediately useful for the given purpose in the given context.
e) A metonymic model is a model of how A and B are related in a conceptual structure; the relationship is specified by a function from B to A.

When such a conventional metonymic model exists as part of a conceptual system, it is claimed, B may be used to stand, metonymically, for A. Mappings within metonymic models are grounded in direct physical or causal assocations of objects in human experience.

In this view a metonymy's use and recovery are constrained by a body of socially sanctioned experience within a given speech community, which takes the form of shared social beliefs. For instance, it is often the case that a number of metonymic models instantiates a single general metonymic model which is particularly productive within a given community; it is by virtue of the general model that the isolated metonymies will be understood. Lakoff (1987: 78) admits that one cannot list all the various metonymies independently and postulates language-specific patterns as a way of capturing their regularity and productiveness. In examples (1) and (2), the metonymies fall under the models PLACE FOR INSTITUTION/PEOPLE WORKING IN THE PLACE and PLACE FOR EVENT respectively. The same productive metonymic models motivate the metonymies in (3) and (4) (from Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 38–9):

(3) a. The White House isn't saying anything.
b. Paris is introducing longer skirts this season.
c. Hollywood isn't what it used to be.
d. Wall Street is in a panic.
(4) a. Remember the Alamo.
b. Pearl Harbour still has an effect on our foreign policy.
c. Watergate changed our politics.

In Lakoff's picture metonymy is essentially a referential shorthand whose success is grounded on empirical associations among objects. I want to argue that this view (let's call it 'associationism') suffers from serious drawbacks on both descriptive and explanatory levels. My first objection to associationism has to do with the confused division of labour it creates between conceptual structure and communication. Although it is often stated in the literature that metonymy represents a fundamental human conceptualising capacity, this capacity is not invoked in the account of the actual use of metonymy in communication. Instead, the comprehension of metonymic expressions seems to be achieved on the basis of the automatic retrieval of cultural/experiential associations. In other words, associationist models largely ignore problems of interpretation by pushing them off onto the conceptual structure itself (see clause (c) in Lakoff's definition of a metonymic model). Consequently, these approaches can at best deal only with conventionalised metonymies; they are unable to handle creative, one-off metonymic uses of the type in (5):

(5) You should avoid marrying a sheep at all costs.
(=someone born in the Year of the Sheep; from Gerrig 1989)

A second problem comes from the status of the metonymic models themselves. On the one hand, they seem to differ widely in terms of conceptual basicness and generality. For instance, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) include in their list of 'metonymic concepts' examples as diverse as PART FOR WHOLE and INSTITUTION FOR AUTHORITIES. It can be argued though, that the first may subsume the second and is far more important for our overall conceptual make-up. On the other hand, the instantiations of a single metonymic concept do not always form a natural class. Consider the concept OBJECT USED FOR USER/ MANIPULATOR:

(6) a. The buses are on strike.
b. Are you the cab parked outside?
c. I wouldn't marry a Mercedes but I would live with a Volvo.
(adapted from Cruse 1992)

If all metonymies that are captured by a particular metonymic concept were interpreted in the same way, there should be no difference in the comprehension of (6a–c). This obviously leaves the feeling of the increasing creativity of the utterances unexplained.

What is more, (6) brings us back to the question: what is the level of abstraction on which metonymic concepts are to be defined? Why can't we postulate a metonymic concept VEHICLE FOR DRIVER to account for the uses above? Surely associationism could not object to this move; if generalised, however, this approach would result in a long and unexplanatory list of isolated metonymies.

There is a third undesirable consequence of associationism which is of interest here. By considering metonymy as a mapping between concepts, one is bound to disregard its connection to the outside world, in particular its referential functions. Consider Nunberg's (1978) famous example:

(7) The ham sandwich is getting restless (uttered among waiters to identify the ham sandwich orderer).

What is crucial here is not so much that there exists a connection between order and customer in the encyclopedic memory of the waiters, but rather the fact that a particular concept/expression has been used to identify a given individual. Therefore, metonymy is not so much a mapping between concepts as a novel way of referring to an external entity. This assumption should provide a way of dealing with the variety of effects created by metonymy, for instance the derogatory overtones of (7).

What these accounts of metonymy essentially lack is a robust pragmatic criterion which could operate on a variety of encyclopedic (or generally, mutually manifest) assumptions including social beliefs and would guide the interpretation of novel metonymy in a way consistent with a general account of utterance interpretation. This should be coupled with a sound semantics-pragmatics distinction (which is often rejected in the cognitive linguistics literature – see, for example, Haiman 1980) and the recognition of graded conventionalisation which would allow for various degrees of creativity. This is what I propose to offer in the relevance-theoretic account of metonymy that follows.

3 Relevance theory and the notion of interpretative use

3.1 Creative uses of metonymy

According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, Wilson and Sperber 1988), a representation with a propositional form, say an utterance, is said to be used interpretatively when it represents another representation which also has a propositional form, by virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms. Interpretative use differs from descriptive use, where a representation is used to describe a state of affairs in the world in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs. Apart from full propositions, individual concepts or conceptual phrases can be used interpretively and become embedded in propositions asserted by the speaker. I want to claim that creative metonymy is a special variety of the interpretative use of language: in particular, it serves as a new name for the intended referent – in other words, it is an instance of dubbing.

Consider a fresh example, uttered during a rehearsal of a jazz band:

(8) The saxophone has the flu.

In order to arrive at the intended interpretation of (8), the hearer pursues an inferential process of hypothesis formation and evaluation using as a starting point the elements made available to him or her from the decoding of the utterance. According to relevance theory, this process of hypothesis formation and evaluation is guided by the principle of relevance, which states that every utterance carries with it a presumption of its own optimal relevance (see Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995:58). Relevance is defined in terms of cognitive effects produced with the expenditure of some processing effort. The presumption of optimal relevance goes as follows:

a) The set of assumptions {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}.

The hearer is entitled to suppose that the intended interpretation of an utterance is the one that creates adequate cognitive effects for no unjustifiable processing effort, in a way that the speaker could manifestly have forseen. Once such an interpretation is reached, the hearer should look no further: the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is the only one consistent with the principle of relevance.

Let us suppose for the moment that the default hypothesis of this inferential process is that the 'literal' proposition expressed by (8), namely (9), is the intended interpretation of the utterance:

(9) The saxophone has the flu <at time x>.

The hearer will reject (9), since on most occasions it cannot rationally have been put forth by the speaker as being optimally relevant to the addressee. Continuing to look for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, the hearer will form a new hypothesis based on the type of predicate of (8), namely that the referent of the definite description *the saxophone* is an individual. In other words, he or she will asume that the referring expression is used interpretively so that (8) makes a statement about a person. In this case, the speaker has obviously put forth the definite phrase not as a truthful description of the referent (i.e. a particular individual), but as an appropriate way of identifying him in the given context. The expression is 'held up' in order to facilitate access to a concept that is normally not part of its denotation. The descriptive content of the referring expression is rather employed as a sort of 'cue' present at the hearer's conceptual representation, which provides a mechanism for accessing a referent by invoking what one might appropriately call him. The resulting form of the proposition expressed will be something along the lines of (10):

(10) The person that could appropriately be called 'the saxophone' had the flu <at time x>.

Note that if the definite description *the saxophone* in (8) is taken at face (descriptive) value, it is impossible to retrieve any proposition of the sort in (10) as an approximation of the thought the speaker wishes to communicate. The reason is that (9) and (10) do not share any (relevant) logical or contextual implications; they contain different referents and different propositional commitments. By recognising the interpretative nature of the definite description, the hearer is able to make a new guess about the thought of the speaker: the propositional form of the utterance is taken to contain a referent and a propositional commitment identical to those of the thought, and the proposition is therefore taken to be a representation by resemblance of the thought behind it.

The propositional form in (10) captures the attempt to explicitly represent the existence of interpretative material within the proposition expressed.[2] The hearer has then to invest some further processing effort in order to arrive at an individuating conceptual representation of the individual who has the flu (I assume that the description is used referentially). He or she may reasonably assume that the speaker has aimed at optimal relevance and has selected the most relevant linguistic stimulus he or she could have used to identify the individual in question. Consequently the hearer is entitled to suppose that the most accessible representation of a referent that is activated by the description and yields a proposition with adequate contextual effects is the intended one.

Now metonymic descriptions like the above usually exploit particularly salient properties of referents which can readily be used for their identification. Salience is essentially a perceptual fact which captures every property that can be focused upon by the process of selective attention. This property may be a more or less permanent part of the encyclopedic entry for the given individual or object that is the referent; alternatively, it may be a property which is immediately available through perception in the particular situation of utterance. In either case it forms part of an assumption mutually manifest to both interlocutors and is capable of serving the purposes of identification in a cognitively cost-efficient way. In our initial example, if we assume that saxophone and saxophone playing figure prominently in the encyclopedic representation of a member of the band (say, John Clark), (10) will receive further enrichment and will yield more specific propositions of the type in (11) or (12):[3]

(11) The person who is playing the saxophone has the flu <at time x>.
(12) John Clark has the flu <at time x>.

In this view, metonymy contributes to the explicatures (i.e. the communicated developments of the logical form) of the utterance; its comprehension forms part of the general inferential work which complements decoding in order to yield the proposition expressed. Part of the difficulty in pragmatically unpacking the metonymic descriptions and identifying their referent lies in the recognition of the particular metonymic relation that is intended. Given that metonymy may draw from the variety of mutually manifest assumptions about properties of the given referent, it is obvious that the traditional inventories of metonymic patterns (PART FOR WHOLE, CONTAINER FOR CONTAINED etc.) are insufficient to cover them; at best they can give some indication as to the direction the inferential mechanism may take in its search for an accessible (and acceptable) referent. The condition given by the second clause of the definition of optimal relevance presumes that the stimulus used will be one that helps the hearer pick out the referent. A very similar case is a sort of 'transparency condition' which governs the fixation of reference when a new name is introduced; see, for instance, the invention of many nicknames:[4]

(13) The Brain is sitting at the front row again.

A question to ask at this point is: why would a speaker choose to use a metonymic and not a 'literal' description of a referent? Relevance theory predicts two possible reasons. On the one hand, if the comprehension of the metonymic description requires a greater amount of processing effort (as is the case in the examples I have presented so far), then the extra effort should be offset by extra/different cognitive effects. Thus the assumption that the speaker has used the most relevant stimulus he or she could have used (according to his or her goals and abilities) to produce the effects he or she intended, is meant to be entertained independently and to acquire some relevance of its own. In (8), for instance, the metonymy may have been used because there was no easier way for the speaker to refer to the saxophone player (that is, the name of the individual was not known to him or her). If it is mutually manifest that the name is available, the hearer may reasonably assume that the purpose of the metonymy was not simply to secure reference but also to give rise to some sort of effects. In (8), readily accessible assumptions involving saxophones may prove rich in cognitive effects about John Clark – for example, by yielding contextual implications about his strong relationship to music. A similar case is (14):

(14) Peter finally married the free ticket to the opera.
(adapted from Sperber 1975)

From the fact that the speaker considered as the most relevant means of identifying Peter's wife her connection to free tickets to the opera, one can infer a number of things about the sort of person Peter is, the kind of marriage he has and so on. Through similar reasoning one may retrieve derogatory overtones from the metonymy in (7). The set of implicatures made manifest by the choice of a particular metonymy may be remarkably rich as implicatures become increasingly weaker. The more creative a metonymy is, the more open-ended the set of weak implicatures becomes – with the upper limit provided, of course, by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance:

(15) You can't read the history of the United States, my friends, without learning the great story of those thousands of unnamed women. And if it's ever told straight, you'll know it's the sunbonnet and not the sombrero that has settled the country.
(E. Ferber – from Corbett 1971: 481–2)

The metonymic expressions *the sunbonnet* and *the sombrero* aim (among other things) at making mutually manifest a range of stereotypical assumptions about femininity and delicacy on the one hand, and masculinity and dynamism on the other. These assumptions, combined with the propositional content of (15) and further contextual assumptions, yield an array of weak implicatures which could not have been communicated by a literal paraphrase. To the extent that an utterance like (15) achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures, it is said to create poetic effects (see Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995:

222). Often poetic effects caused by the use of metonymy include affective as well as cognitive aspects, in which case the aim of the speaker is to produce emotional rather than cognitive mutuality, common impressions rather than common knowledge:

(16) My own blood can't do that to me.

The second reason for using a metonymy has to do with economy of processing effort. For some specialised situations of use (professional and other), it makes sense to abandon our provisional hypothesis that the 'literal' meaning of a metonymy is accessed and tested first. It is possible that, after repeated use, a given metonymic expression may achieve its referential purposes without there existing a phase of retrieving and checking the descriptive content for acceptability. This seems to be the case with whole groups of lexemes/concepts, which form the input to generalised pragmatic routines of the sort studied by Lakoff and his associates. Here there is no extra processing cost and hence no extra effects for the hearer; what matters is the cost-efficient identification of the referent:

(7) The ham sandwich is getting restless.
(17) The ulcer has to move to room G14. (between doctors)

The role of generalised pragmatic routines is linked to the issue of the conventionalisation of once creative metonymies, to which I now turn in more detail.

3.2 Degrees of conventionalisation

Creative uses of metonymy form one end of a continuum of phenomena which have been classified under 'mètonymy' in the literature; the other end of the continuum is occupied by fully semanticised metonymies that have been registered in the lexicon. It is an entirely uncontroversial claim that metonymy may result in semantic change (see Ullmann 1962: 218). The relevant phenomenon is traditionally called 'catachresis': that is, use of an inappropriate term in order to fill a vocabulary gap. Good examples are provided by the French words *bureau* ('cloth covering a piece of furniture' –> 'desk' –> 'work place/business including a number of desks' –> 'group running a business' – which in sessions meets round a writing table etc.) and *grève* ('bank of Seine' –> 'spot on Seine's bank where unemployed workers met' –> 'act of stopping work' – strike). Semanticised metonymies in English include *spoon, orange, tongue* etc. (see Ruhl 1989: 97).

Metonymic semantic change flows directly from i) the proposal concerning semantic change caused by the interpretative use of concepts (see Sperber and Wilson 1983: 69–70), and ii) the naming function of novel metonymies. After being extensively used, a metonymic expression that has originated as a product of successful naming may begin to lose its former descriptive content; consequently it can gradually accept as its new descriptive content the referential content it has when used interpretively. What the speakers initially did not endorse as a truthful description of a referent becomes the proper descriptive meaning of the expression and is registered in the lexicon. The empirical consequence of this is an increase in the accessibility of the referent, since the latter does not have to be computed any more but merely retrieved from memory; the motivation of the whole phenomenon lies in referential cost-efficiency.

The intermediate cases in the continuum of metonymy allow for various degrees of conventionalisation of the interpretive use. I have already mentioned that metonymies used in a standardised way in professional and other groups may be dealt with in terms of generalised pragmatic routines; these operate on the basis of mutually manifest assumptions that are recurrently used for identification purposes. Other metonymies have greater productivity ranging over large classes of the vocabulary. A classic example is the AUTHOR FOR WORK metonymy, whose relative conventionalisation can be checked by a number of tests (see Fauconnier 1985). Compare the pairs:

(18) a. Proust is a great author. He is on the top shelf.
b. The ham sandwich was stale. *It left without paying.

(19) a. Proust, who is on the top shelf, was a great man.
b. *The ham sandwich, which left without paying, was stale.

It seems that this particular metonymic relation is widespread in a variety of languages from Chinese to Russian (see Nunberg 1978, 1979). The generalised pragmatic routine which is in operation here is supported by the firm cultural assumption that the most relevant means of identifying an intellectual or artistic work is through its creator. This is precisely the sort of metonymy that the cognitive linguistic tradition has focused on (see the examples in (3) and (4)).

The tests of pronominalisation and relativisation are not always reliable indicators of the degree of conventionalisation of a given metonymic mechanism. For instance, their results may clash with those of other tests such as reflexivisation; it is indeed difficult to explain why (20a), while still distinctly better than (20b), is worse than (18a) or (19a):

(20) a. ?Proust used to read himself before going to bed.
b. * The ham sandwich is eating itself hungrily.

The reasons for such inconsistency lie in the fact that generalised pragmatic routines are merely an intermediate stage in linguistic development. This stage is often characterised by increasing sharedness of the routine among the members of the linguistic community and greater predictability of the meaning extensions a term will take on. As a result, a given routine may exhibit variable behaviour if checked against different diagnostic techniques, each one demanding a different degree of semanticisation (for the inadequacy of the standard tests for distinguishing semantic/pragmatic aspects of lexical meaning see Geeraerts 1990). This inconsistency is observed with metonymies which at first sight seem better candidates for conventional status than the ones in (18)–(20). An example is provided by the type ACTIVITY FOR RESULT OF ACTIVITY which is widely observed in the interpretation of nominalisations; (21a) is evidently more acceptable than (21b):

(21) a. The painting, which took him a lifetime, is hanging on a wall in the dining room.
b. ? The painting is hanging on a wall in the dining room and took him a lifetime.

There exist routines which have become part of the linguistic knowledge of the speakers and have taken the form of a semantic rule which, when fed with input A, yields output B. An example is the possibility of using a deverbal nominal expression to denote 'the fact that V', as shown in the utterances:

(22) The writing of such a good article by Chomsky surprised me.
(23) My hate for ants is well-known.

In (22) it is the fact that Chomsky wrote a good article that surprised the speaker; in (23) what is well-known is the fact that the speaker hates ants. The relation between the two nominal meanings is again a metonymic one (it can be viewed as a sort of PART FOR WHOLE relation) and it applies as a general rule of semantic extension across the whole set of deverbal nominals in English (see Nikiforidou forthcoming). There is no need to specify the output of the rule in the lexical entry of each nominalisation; pragmatic considerations will each time specify whether the rule will apply or not.

More frequently metonymic pragmatic routines give rise to semantic extensions in a constrained way. A certain metonymic mapping becomes registered in the lexicon as productive within a certain semantic field or some smaller set of lexical items (or even a single one of them). As in the previous case, metonymy gives rise to systematic lexical polysemy. This has happened with the use of a term denoting a container to refer to the contained material:

(24) Put in the two cups and stir well.
(25) We drank three bottles last night.

Here the 'contained' meaning will be derived on-line from the 'container' one via a semantic rule. Depending on factors such as frequency of use and sharedness of the metonymically related meanings, both the original and the extended meaning may come to be registered together with the specification of the semantic rule under a single lexical entry. The rule will now carry mere etymological information and will take the form of a redundancy rule (as Norrick 1981 has suggested). In the final stage of this process the once related meanings may synchronically become completely distinct, or even the original one may disappear. The result is metonymically motivated semantic change, as it was presented in the beginning of this section.

The picture which emerges from the above discussion is an extremely complex and dynamic one. A certain cognitive mechanism, metonymy, seems to operate across the semantics/pragmatics distinction giving rise to different semantic and pragmatic extensions of meaning. Even within the semantic component one needs to distinguish variation in the productiveness and generality of a specific metonymic relation, in its distribution and its place in a general trend of semantic development. Moreover, it is among the idiosyncrasies of lexical semantics that one expects considerable interpersonal variation: what for one individual is part of the encoded meaning of a lexical item may for another be part of its interpretation in a specific context.

The issue of adjudicating between semantic and pragmatic aspects of lexical meaning is one of the most thorny ones in theoretical linguistics (see Lyons 1977, Cruse 1986); indeed much of what I have said pertains directly to the controversial distinction between polysemy and vagueness (what Horn (1985) has termed 'pragmatic ambiguity', which is nothing more than various interpretations available in context). For most cases we need to decide on an individual basis whether the meaning conveyed by the term is i) a product of one-off pragmatic interpretation, ii) an instance of a generalised pragmatic routine, iii) a product of the application of a semantic rule, iv) a meaning directly retrieved from among the network of related senses of a polysemous entry or, finally, v) the output of mere semantic decoding of a monosemous lexical item for which no derivational information is synchronically available in the linguistic knowledge of the speakers.

4 Conclusion

Although the present account needs some further development, I hope that it has become clear that metonymy is not a natural class, at least as far as its comprehension is concerned. Instead of relying on some loose notion of 'association among objects' to account for metonymy as a unified phenomenon, it is preferable to view metonymy as a fundamental cognitive mechanism which may motivate pragmatic as well as semantic phenomena. By placing it within the more general metarepresentational dimension of language and considering it a subcase of interpretative use, a relevance-theoretic account can capture the fact that metonymy represents a continuum of cases according to the degree in which the accessibility of the descriptive content has been retained.

The results of the present discussion have rich implications for figurative and creative uses of language in general. Any cognitively motivated attempt to study tropes should take into account the ways in which the mental mechanisms which underlie their formation interact with linguistic and non-linguistic (social, cultural and other) knowledge, as well as with general pragmatic considerations. Approaches to lexical semantics have only recently started taking seriously the idea that conventionalisation (and, inversely, figurativeness) is a matter of degree and have tried to adopt finer distinctions along the semantics/pragmatics interface (see Ruhl 1989, Sweetser 1990, Emanatian 1991, Clark 1994, Nunberg 1995). Relevance theory has proved successful in accounting for the creative aspects of figurative language[5]: there is still a lot of research to be carried out in the area of the semanticisation of the interpretive use of language. This path may conceivably lead to rigid amendments of the field of semantics, revising well-received ideas such as compositionality and introducing various sub-propositional levels of meaning computations that will ultimately contribute to the proposition expressed by the utterance.[6]

Notes

1. Earlier attempts to give a relevance-theoretic treatment of metonymy include Papafragou (1995a and b). In the present paper I have expanded the data under consideration so as to cover a continuum of metonymic uses with various degrees of conventionalisation. I am grateful to Deirdre Wilson, Robyn Carston and Adrian Pilkington for many helpful discussions on metonymy. This article forms part of my postgraduate research at University College London, which was supported by a grant from the State Scholarships Foundation in Greece.
2. Although the metarepresentational use of language – of which (8) is a subcase – is surrounded by many problems (see Carston 1994: 338), we can accept that the interpreted material appears within some sort of quotation marks in the semantic representation of (8).
3. I bypass here the specific issues concerning referential definite descriptions (e.g. the question of whether to include the descriptive material within the proposition expressed); for a relevance-theoretic approach to these issues see Rouchota 1992.
4. We also have metaphorical nicknames for which one should invoke the idea of resemblance among concepts – which would capture the resemblance among the respective objects or individuals (e.g. 'Where is my sunshine?', used to refer to the speaker's wife). When a nickname yields its referent without the intermediate inferential steps I describe, it becomes a directly referential expression (see a number of definite descriptions which have 'grown capital letters', such as *the Holy Roman Empire* or *the Morning Star).*
5. The implications of relevance theory for literature are discussed in Green 1993, Kiparsky 1987, Pilkington 1991, 1992, 1994, Reboul 1990, Richards 1985, Trotter 1992 (among others).
6. Recanati (1995) in particular has voiced concerns for compositionality, which will have to allow for what I have here called 'generalised pragmatic routines'; in earlier work (Recanati 1993) he suggests that primary pragmatic processes such as metonymic transfers, conceptual enrichment and saturation of indexicals are to be carried out locally, i.e. before the whole of the proposition expressed is computed by the addressee. Indeed, whenever a 'non-literal' interpretation has for some reason higher accessibility then the literal one (see *the ham sandwich* in specialised contexts), there is no reason for the whole of the literal proposition to be constructed and rejected before the intended one is reached. A local interpretation of such figurative expressions seems to be corroborated by experimental findings in the psychology of processing (see Gibbs 1987, 1989).

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